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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001858

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, S/CT, SA/PD; NSC FOR
E. MILLARD

DEPARTMENT PLEASE ALSO PASS TOPEC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10-28-13
TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER MARR ETRD CE IN
SUBJECT: Enthusiastic local reaction to the
Prime Minister's recent visit to India

Refs: (A) New Delhi 5921

- (B) Colombo 1853, and previous

(U) Classified by Charge' d'Affaires James F. Entwistle.
Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

SUMMARY

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1. (C) Local reaction to Prime Minister Wickremesinghe's recent visit to India has been enthusiastic. Press coverage trumpeted the visit as signaling that India had decided to back the GSL and its peace initiative fully. Contacts also stressed that the visit had sent a strong message of support to the south. The Indian polcouns said he thought the visit had hit the right notes, but warned that too much should not be read into it. While the local reaction was overblown, our sense is that the visit served to buck up the peace process at a critical moment. END SUMMARY.

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Sri Lanka Gushes over PM's Visit

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2. (SBU) Local reaction to Prime Minister Wickremesinghe's October 19-22 visit to India has been enthusiastic. Press coverage trumpeted the visit as signaling that India had finally decided to back the Sri Lankan government and its peace initiative fully. Gushing headlines on the visit in English-language papers focused mainly on its defense and economic cooperation aspects (see Ref A), and included:

-- "The Security Umbrella Unfurls"

-- "India to the Defense"

-- "India's New Regional Security Umbrella Plans"

-- "Making Lanka the Gateway to India"

-- "Enter India to Usher in Real Peace"

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Contacts: "Visit Helped Process in South"

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3. (C) In more restrained tones than the press coverage, contacts stressed that the visit had sent a strong message of support to the Sinhalese south from India, the major regional power. Reaction included:

-- Jehan Perera, media director for the National Peace Council, a local think-tank, told poloff on October 28 that he thought the south was "very reassured" by the vocal support that India had given to the peace process. Perera noted that he felt this support was a signal on the part of the GoI that the peace process was now at a stage where India could safely re-engage in closer ties with Sri Lanka. This, in turn, was a sign that India was finally getting over the failure of the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) and Rajiv Gandhi's assassination by the Tigers.

-- Rohan Edirisinghe, an analyst with the Center for Policy Alternatives, another local think-tank, agreed that the positive vibrations emanating from the PM's visit had "definitely" helped the peace process. India had made clear to Sri Lankans that it was "very supportive" of the peace process and this message was "very reassuring to the south." Edirisinghe noted that the visit -- coming as it did on the eve of the unveiling of the Tigers' response regarding power-sharing in the north/east -- was well-timed.

-- M.L.A.M Hizbullah, a senior Opposition MP with the Muslim National Unity Alliance, said he thought the visit was definitely an indication that India wanted closer ties with the GSL after years of maintaining an

arms-length relationship. As also touched on by Edirisinghe, Hizbullah went on to state that the timing of the Indian support had helped the PM's standing in the south at the key moment just before the Tigers issued their counterproposals, which were potentially highly combustible in a political sense.

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Indian Polcouns: No Shift in Policy by GoI
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14. (C) In an October 28 discussion with polchief, Taranjit Sandhu, the Indian High Commission polcouns, said he thought that Prime Minister Wickremesinghe's visit had been constructive and "made for good pictures." In making this point, he stressed that: "All the key meetings -- with Vajpayee, Advani, Gandhi -- had gone smoothly, with no down notes." Sandhu added that the two countries' joint announcement that they would proceed with plans to expand the bilateral free trade agreement and enhance defense cooperation had indicated the existence of a "robust, dynamic" relationship. Since the United National Party (UNP) had taken over power in December 2001, the GoI felt that it had a developed solid rapport with both PM Wickremesinghe and key Minister Milinda Moragoda. The success of the PM's recent visit was confirmation that "this chemistry continued to work."

15. (C) All that said, Sandhu emphasized that he thought the local reaction had gone too far and that too much should not be read into the visit. Sandhu stated: "I know that there is a bit of exuberance in Sri Lanka, but India has not changed its longtime substantive positioning regarding the ethnic conflict." India, he said, would continue to support the GSL's peace initiative and urge ethnic reconciliation in Sri Lanka, but it still had no plans to involve itself directly in the process. Moreover, despite much local press speculation, he noted that India had no plans to help the Sri Lankan government "bottle up" the LTTE. On this point, Sandhu underlined that enhanced defense cooperation did not mean that there would be any sort of "mutual defense treaty" between the two countries. India also had "absolutely no plans to send armed forces to Sri Lanka" despite calls by some Sinhalese extremists for such intervention.

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COMMENT
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16. (C) As Sandhu noted, the local reaction to the visit was overblown. Sri Lankans clearly wanted to receive a positive signal from India and they magnified the visit to the full extent. Our sense, however, is that the visit indeed was important in that it served to buck up the peace process at a very critical moment. The LTTE's counterproposals regarding the north/east -- which are due to be issued in the next several days -- are bound to be very controversial to some in the south. In light of the probable turbulence, the GSL needs all the help it can get from the international community -- and the PM's visit to India was a sign that such support is there. At the same time, the LTTE was sent a clear message that India is watching the process closely. What the volatile Tigers made of that message remains unclear, but the group has in the past murmured semi-threateningly about the GSL's trying to create an "international safety net." Of course, the GoI warrant for LTTE leader V. Prabakaran's arrest for the murder of Rajiv Gandhi remains a core issue in how the Tigers view New Delhi. END COMMENT.

17. (U) Minimize considered.

ENTWISTLE